

**Standard 6-4** The student will demonstrate an understanding of changing political, social, and economic cultures in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

**6-4.4** Compare the significant political, social, geographic, and economic features and the contributions of the Aztec, Mayan, and Incan civilizations, including their forms of government and their contributions in mathematics, astronomy, and architecture. (H, G, E, P)

**Taxonomy Level:** B 2 Understand/Conceptual Knowledge

**Previous/future knowledge:**

This is the first time students have been taught about early Mesoamerican civilizations.

In Global Studies, students will compare the origins and characteristics of the Mayan, Aztec, and Incan civilizations, including their economic foundations, their political organization, their technological achievements, and their cultural legacies of art and architecture (GS-2.4).

**It is essential for students to know** that for more than 1100 years (circa 400-1550 AD), three separate, but similar, civilizations flourished in Central and South America. These civilizations were the Mayans, Aztecs, and Incas. Farming led to the growth of each of these civilizations. Growing corn and other crops created a shift from hunter-gatherer societies to more complex stationary societies. Although the Mayans, Aztecs and Incas were geographically isolated and left little of their culture behind, they were each advanced civilizations.

The **Mayans** were able to create a sophisticated network of city-states with a king and military forces out of the Yucatan Peninsula rainforest and support it with agriculture and trade. The geography of this region played an essential role in the rise and eventual decline of the Mayan civilization. The Maya settled in an area called the Pet'en (the Mayan word for "flat region") that was heavily forested and also contained numerous swamps and sinkholes. Generally these geographic features would make an area undesirable, but the Maya realized that the swamps and sinkholes located on the Yucatan Peninsula provided a continuous source of fresh water and that the land could be farmed through the use of slash and burn agriculture resulting in the removal of the surrounding rainforest. The Maya set up city-states ruled by Mayan kings who were considered to be god-kings who descended from the sun. They claimed the right to rule and expected the Mayans to serve and worship them. Mayan engineering was sufficiently advanced to produce extensive cities that included pyramids to honor the gods. The step pyramid remains at [*Chichen Itza* and *Tikal*], with its temples and ball courts, are evidence of this. The priests studied the heavens closely to determine the plans of the gods and to know when to plant crops. They applied their study of astronomy to create a 365-day calendar and a base-20 numbering system. The Mayans developed a system of hieroglyphics to record numbers and dates of important religious festivals, plantings and harvests. By the year 500 AD, Mayan cities had been in existence for more than 300 years and the Maya had reached their peak in economic prosperity. It is estimated that two hundred years later, the Mayan population reached its peak. Between the years 750 and 900 AD, one Mayan city after another was abandoned and much of the Mayan population disappeared. The cause of the Mayan demise is uncertain. There are

numerous theories and they suggest a decline in food production and decrease in the water supply as well as invasion from outside groups

It is essential for students to know that the **Aztecs** established a powerful empire in the central valley of modern-day Mexico with a multi-tiered social hierarchy. The Aztecs settled in an area that today is Mexico City. It was an area high in elevation, surrounded by mountains, with a lake and swampland - an area that was to become known as the Valley of Mexico. The physical geography of this region played a major role in the success of the Aztec society. This central valley region was swampy and the resourceful Aztecs built terraces on hills that were previously not farmable. The swamps provided them with wild plants and fish, frogs and ducks to eat. Agriculture became the basis for the success of the Aztec civilization. They built chinampas, floating gardens in the swamps. On the chinampas the Aztecs grew corn, avocados, beans, chili peppers, squash, and tomatoes. Aztec food production allowed for an expansion in population and wealth that permitted them to expand their empire. They built a capital city [*Tenochtitlan*] in the middle of a giant lake connected to the mainland by causeways and floating gardens. The Aztecs were led by strong emperors who also claimed to be descendents of the gods. Aztec society was made up of four classes: nobles, commoners, unskilled laborers, and enslaved people. They sustained themselves with agriculture and trade. They paid tributes to the gods and practiced a polytheistic religion that prescribed human sacrifice. A huge pyramid, the Great Temple in Tenochtitlan, was built to honor the Aztec gods. Thousands of people were sacrificed at the top of this temple. A sacred calendar used for worship and a solar calendar for agricultural purposes were also developed by the Aztecs. The final demise of the Aztec civilization came when Montezuma, the Aztec emperor, was defeated by the Spanish captain, Cort'es in June, 1521 AD.

It is essential for students to know that the **Incas** created a civilization high in the Andes Mountains of modern-day Peru. The Incas began to expand their influence in the twelfth century and in the early sixteenth century and they exercised control over more territory than any other group of people in South American history. The empire consisted of over one million individuals, spanning a territory stretching from Ecuador to northern Chile. Unlike the military empires in Central America, the Incas ruled by proxy. The Incas had a very strong emperor (the Inca) who allowed local leaders to remain in power. This monarch ruled over a highly-structured society. The social structure of the Incas was inflexible. At the top was the Inca who exercised absolute power. Below the Inca was the royal family, a ruling aristocracy. Each tribe had tribal heads; each clan in each tribe had clan heads. At the very bottom were the common people. The social unit, then, was primarily based on cooperation and communality. This guaranteed that there would always be enough for everyone; but the centralization of authority meant that there was no chance of individual advancement. Farming was difficult in the Andes. The Andes Mountains were terraced to create farmland. The Incas cultivated corn and potatoes, and raised llama and alpaca for food and for labor. The Inca were skilled engineers and built massive forts with stone slabs so perfectly cut that they didn't require mortar. An example of this is [Machu Picchu], a retreat built for Incan kings. They also built roads through the mountains from Ecuador to Chile with tunnels and bridges and they built aqueducts to their cities as the Romans had. They were also advanced in medicine and surgery. The Incas spoke Quechua, which they imposed on all the peoples they conquered. Because of this, Quechua is still spoken among large numbers of Native Americans throughout the Andes. They had no writing system at all, but they

kept records on various colored knotted cords, or *quipu*. The central god of the Incan religion was the sun-god, the only god that had temples built for him. The sun-god was the father of the royal family. The Incas were polytheistic, but the sun-god was worshiped above the other gods. Human sacrifices were routinely made to please the gods. The demise of the Incan civilization came in the 1530s at the hands of Pizarro and the Spanish Conquistadores after years of fighting. Francisco Pizarro convinced the ruler of the Incas, Atahualpa, to come to a conference at the city of Cajamarca. When Atahualpa arrived, Pizarro kidnapped him and killed several hundred of his family and followers. Atahualpa tried to buy his freedom, but Pizarro eventually executed him in 1533. Over the next thirty years the Spanish struggled against various Incan insurrections, but finally gained control of the Inca Empire in the 1560s.

**It is not essential for students to know** the names of individual Mesoamerican leaders (i.e. Montezuma) or Spanish conquistadors. Students do not need to know exact dates of the falls of the empires. However, they do need to know the general time period in which the civilizations existed and declined.

**Assessment guidelines:** In order to measure understanding of significant political, social, geographic, and economic features and contributions of the Aztecs, Mayans, and Incas, appropriate assessments will require the students to **compare** the political and economic systems of the three civilizations, **infer** from their inventions and architectural achievements the importance of mathematics, science, and geography; and **compare** the decline and eventual demise of each of the civilizations.